

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

Witness Statement

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THE NATURE CONSERVANCY
Before the Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans
Committee on Resources
United States House of Representatives
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Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, I appreciate this opportunity to present The Nature Conservancy's testimony in support of H.R. 4286, legislation to create the Cahaba River National Wildlife Refuge in Alabama.

The Nature Conservancy is an international, non-profit organization dedicated to the conservation of biological diversity. Our mission is to preserve the plants, animals and natural communities that represent the diversity of life on Earth by protecting the lands and waters they need to survive. The Conservancy has more than 1,000,000 individual members and 1,900 corporate associates. We currently have programs in all 50 states and in 27 foreign countries. To date we have protected more than 11 million acres in the 50 states and Canada, and have helped local partner organizations preserve 60 million acres overseas. The Conservancy owns and manages 1,340 preserves throughout the United States - the largest private system of nature sanctuaries in the world. Sound science and strong partnerships with public and private landowners to achieve tangible and lasting results characterize our conservation programs.

In a 1998 publication entitled *Rivers of Life*, The Nature Conservancy profiled several watersheds across the United States that are extraordinary hotspots for biological diversity. Though we are a nation devoted to the beauty and recreational values of our streams, creeks, and rivers, few of us realize that the diversity of life in freshwater systems in the U.S. is exceptional, even when compared with the tropics. However, two centuries of dam construction, water withdrawals, land-use alterations, pollution, and introductions of non-native species have lead to the accelerated and, in many cases, irreparable losses of freshwater species. Several groups of freshwater species are in particular peril:

- Two-thirds of freshwater mussel species are at risk of extinction, and almost 1 in 10 may already have vanished forever;
- Half of all crayfish species are in jeopardy; and,
- 40 percent of freshwater fishes and amphibians are at risk.

Approximately 2,100 small watersheds cover the continental United States. *Rivers of Life* identifies the 15 percent of these small watershed areas that will conserve populations of all freshwater fish and mussel

species at risk in the United States. This report, in essence, provides a blueprint for achieving the biggest bang for the conservation dollar.

The Southeastern United States is a hot spot for freshwater biodiversity, resulting from the coincidence of a diverse physical geography, favorable climate, and a long but dynamic history. This varied landscape was spared the repeated habitat-crushing advances of continental ice sheets during the Pleistocene era, allowing living things to persist and evolve over time. Over time, changes in climate, stream drainage patterns, and coastline position isolated many populations, enabling them to diverge genetically and evolve into new species. This unique evolutionary history is evident today in Alabama. Some interesting facts about Alabama's natural resources include:

- Alabama ranks fourth in the nation in terms of biological diversity and, on a per square mile basis, only Florida is home to a greater number of species;
- Alabama has more species of fish, mussels, snails and crayfish than any other state;
- Alabama's freshwater streams and rivers contain 38% of the nation's native fish species, 60% of native turtles and 43% of native aquatic snails; and,
- Alabama ranks near the bottom of states with public land designated specifically for the protection of biodiversity.

The Nature Conservancy has identified the Cahaba River watershed in Alabama as one of these unique conservation opportunities. Almost 50 percent of all documented U.S. species extinctions since European settlement have occurred during this century in the Mobile River Basin, through which the Cahaba River courses. Alabama bears the unfortunate distinction of being the most extinction-prone state in the continental United States, with 98 species extinct.

Within this landscape of species loss, the Cahaba River remains the state's longest free-flowing river, and one of our nation's most biologically rich. The Cahaba River basin supports 69 rare and imperiled species, including 12 fish and mussel species that are listed under the U.S. Endangered Species Act. It has more fish species, 131, than any river its size in North America. To put this in perspective, the Cahaba River has more species of freshwater fish than the entire state of California. One of these fish is the Cahaba shiner, which is found only in the mainstem of this river. Although the number of freshwater mussels and snails has declined sharply from historical numbers, many species are still well represented in the river.

The Cahaba River is a treasure trove of botanical life as well. As the river flows southward into rural Bibb County, it shelters the largest known stand of the imperiled shoal lily (*Hymenocallis coronaria*). Celebrated locally as the Cahaba Lily, this spectacular and surprisingly delicate flower grows in the middle of the river, wedging its bulbs into crevices in the limestone rock. Bibb County is also home to a unique terrestrial plant community, the Bibb County glades, mostly found immediately adjacent to the Little Cahaba River and within the area proposed for the Refuge. In 1992 scientists discovered eight new species of plants on limestone outcrops along the Cahaba's banks; a discovery befitting expeditions to uncharted tropical wildernesses.

Until recently, the steep-sided Appalachian ridges of the Cahaba's headwater tributaries kept streamside development to a minimum. However, population growth is pushing residential and commercial development from Birmingham into the Cahaba River watershed, resulting in increased stormwater runoff,

sedimentation, and municipal wastewater discharges. At the same time, domestic drinking water withdrawals from the Cahaba divert virtually its entire flow during drought periods. Although threats in the upper watershed are growing, the lower half of the watershed, where the Cahaba's biodiversity is most remarkable, is somewhat healthier.

To prevent degradation of this rich biological resource, government agencies, conservation groups, and citizen's groups are working together to protect the Cahaba's rare and endemic aquatic species and natural communities. The proposed Cahaba River National Wildlife Refuge is an outstanding example of diverse interests working together in partnership for the common good of all Alabamians. Comprising approximately 3,500 acres, the proposed refuge would protect over 3.5 miles of what Conservancy scientists deem to be the most biologically significant stretch of the Cahaba River. The lands included within the refuge boundaries involve four landowners, all of whom are willing sellers. The largest landowner within the proposed boundaries, U.S. Alliance Coosa Pines, is a major forest products company. Included as part of this testimony is a letter from U.S. Alliance expressing their support for the establishment of the area as the Cahaba River National Wildlife Refuge.

The Nature Conservancy anticipates that acquisition of 3,500 acres for the Refuge will cost between four and five million dollars. U.S. Alliance and The Nature Conservancy have agreed to pursue a two-year option on 2,800 acres of their land and we are currently in the process of negotiating purchase options with other willing sellers.

The Cahaba River National Wildlife Refuge would protect significant habitat for numerous endangered species of fish and mussels, but especially unique is the partnership between U.S. Alliance and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS). U.S. Alliance is working with USFWS to develop a 10-year timber reservation, which allows Alliance to harvest the mature loblolly pine plantations and includes a plan to insure the area is reforested to the native mountain longleaf pine that once dominated this area.

In addition, since the very beginning of this partnership, The Nature Conservancy has been working very closely with the USFWS on this proposal. It is our understanding through coordination with the Atlanta Regional Office of USFWS that this proposal has cleared the first important hurdle in their refuge planning process. Based on the significant fish and wildlife resources and public use opportunities available at the site, the initial review resulted in a positive finding at the both the field and regional level. USFWS staff is currently preparing the internal document that will be forwarded to the headquarters level for Director approval.

The local citizens from Bibb County strongly support the refuge concept. Included with this testimony is a resolution adopted unanimously by the Bibb County Commission expressing their strong support for the creation of the Cahaba River National Wildlife Refuge. The Bibb County Commission, in conjunction with the Cahaba River Authority (a committee appointed by the Commission to monitor activities regarding the river) has budgeted \$75,000 for river corridor protection. Discussions are currently underway between the Authority and Commission to make that money available for the operations and management of the proposed Refuge. The Commission is scheduled to vote on the proposed donation on June 13, 2000 and it looks very favorable that this proposal will be approved.

In the spirit of cooperation with local citizens, elected officials, and the federal government, The Nature Conservancy has also pledged \$150,000 towards the establishment of this refuge. We propose that the money be used first to secure options from landowners, then after transfer of the property to USFWS, be applied toward operations and management of the Refuge.

Since public announcement of the proposed refuge, The Nature Conservancy has received hundreds of calls from local citizens, conservation organizations, and public corporations expressing their support and inquiring how they can help with this project. Local press coverage indicates strong support and we have not heard of anyone opposed to the establishment of this refuge.

The proposed Cahaba River National Wildlife Refuge represents an outstanding opportunity to protect some of the rarest species in the world via a remarkable public private partnership. The Nature Conservancy requests Committee support of H.R. 4286.

Thank you for your attention. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

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